

# WIDA FOCUS ON Differentiation



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## Introduction

English language learners can reach the same high content-area standards as all students, but they need different pathways. All teachers and administrators who have ELLs in their classes and schools need to know how to differentiate for ELLs because all educators—not just ESL or bilingual educators—share responsibility for ELL achievement.

This WIDA Focus Bulletin will be presented in two parts, which will together provide a useful planning template and step-by-step explanations of how teachers (classroom/content-area, special education, literacy, ESL, bilingual) can differentiate their grade-level content and language instruction and assessment for the ELLs in their classes. But first, what exactly do we mean by differentiating for ELLs?



## Differentiation through scaffolding and support

### DEFINITIONS:

**SCAFFOLD:** an educator's intentional act of building upon students' already acquired skills and knowledge to teach new skills

**SUPPORT:** use of instructional strategies or tools used to assist students in accessing content necessary for classroom understanding or communication and to help construct meaning from language

Differentiating instruction and assessment for ELLs is an approach that teachers can use to make their grade-level content-area instruction comprehensible and challenging to all of the students in their classes, with specific attention to the diverse language and learning needs of their ELLs. This approach also enables every teacher to **scaffold** and **support** their ELLs' movement along the continuum of second language development. Differentiating for ELLs supports students' active engagement in all of their classes every day, which in turn leads to greater equity and achievement for these learners.

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# The differentiated assignment/assessment template

Shelley Fairbairn and Stephaney Jones-Vo introduce the differentiated assignment/assessment template in their book *Differentiating Instruction and Assessment for English Language Learners: A Guide for K-12 Teachers* (2010). This template is a powerful framework that teachers can use to design assignments and assessments that reflect the big ideas or enduring understandings that all students need to learn within the standards-driven units and lessons they teach. It can also be used to generate realistic, meaningful, and measurable content and language objectives and assessments that are appropriate for all students, particularly for ELLs at all five levels of English language proficiency (ELP). According to Fairbairn and Jones-Vo,

*In order to think about how to differentiate assignments for ELLs, we must consider the aspects of the assignment that can or should be differentiated. In most cases, the standards-based content or topic (from the curriculum) must remain the same at all levels of language proficiency, since all students must generally be taught to the same set of standards. Therefore, the aspects of the assignment that can be differentiated are the language-based expectations and the scaffolding and support (p. 83).*

Fairbairn and Jones-Vo include the following sample template to guide planning.

| (STUDENT'S ENGLISH LANGUAGE PROFICIENCY LEVEL LISTED HERE) |
|--|
| Language-Based Expectations:                               |
| Standards-Based Content or Topic (from the curriculum):    |
| Scaffolding and Support:                                   |

Aha! WIDA Standards users:  
Do you notice how the format of this template mirrors the parts of a model performance indicator: language function, content stem, support?

Sample differentiating instruction and assessment template. © Caslon. Source: Fairbairn, S. & Jones-Vo, S. (2010). *Differentiating Instruction and Assessment for English Language Learners: A Guide for K-12 Teachers*, p. 84. Philadelphia: Caslon. Reprinted with permission.

Teachers write **language-based expectations** (row 1) for each ELP level based on the WIDA CAN DO Descriptors (available at [www.wida.us](http://www.wida.us)) or another standards-based resource. The CAN DO Descriptors are a part of WIDA's larger CAN DO Philosophy that emphasize the positive qualities and assets our ELLs bring to the classroom, allowing educators to build on what they already know and can do. The CAN DO language-based expectations provide a foundation for generating language objectives and authentic assessments, which should be differentiated for ELLs based on their ELP levels and other relevant background factors.

The **standards-based content or topic** (row 2) is derived from the curriculum and is expressed on the template in terms of big ideas or enduring understandings (see side bar on p. 3 for explanation of these terms). These big ideas provide the basis for generating content objectives which are more or less the same for every student in the class, including ELLs.

Teachers write the types of **scaffolding and support** (row 3) that each ELL in their class needs in order to engage with and learn in each instructional activity. Like language objectives, teachers differentiate the specific scaffolding and support strategies that they select to build on the particular language, literacy, and learning strengths of the ELLs in their classes.

## WHAT DOES DIFFERENTIATED INSTRUCTION AND ASSESSMENT FOR ELLS LOOK LIKE IN PRACTICE?

To answer this question, we will explore Fairbairn & Jones-Vo's scenario of how one assignment within an elementary school unit on the topic of the rainforest can be differentiated for ELLs at all levels of English language proficiency (pp. 262-266). We focus here on the hypothetical example of Mr. Nelson's self-contained fifth-grade class which includes three ELLs: Marco, Julia, and Amitabh.

## MAKING SENSE OF THE ELP LEVELS

Mr. Nelson begins learning more about the ELLs in his class by paying particular attention to their levels of English language proficiency. One way he can do this is by examining his students' results from an ELP assessment. Although two students may display the same overall composite score, like Julia and Amitabh, they may reflect two very different profiles. For this reason, it is

especially important that Mr. Nelson also considers his students' individual language domain scores. A student's performance in each language domain provides a more comprehensive and realistic profile than that derived from the overall composite score. Mr. Nelson should also gather information about his ELLs' oral language and literacy development in their home languages and their prior schooling.

| MARCO, LEVEL 1 ELL   | JULIA, LEVEL 3 ELL  | AMITABH, LEVEL 3 ELL  |
|--|---|---|
| <p><b>Born:</b> in Brazil</p> <p><b>Home language:</b><br/>Brazilian Portuguese</p> <p><b>Home language skills:</b><br/>can read and write in Portuguese, but probably below grade level</p> <p><b>Enrolled in U.S. schools:</b><br/>earlier this year</p> <p><b>Educational background:</b><br/>4 years of schooling in Brazil at 3 different schools with frequent absences</p> <p><b>Background in English:</b><br/>informal exposure outside of school</p> <p><b>Placement test scores:</b><br/>Level 1 Listening<br/>Level 1 Speaking<br/>Level 1 Reading<br/>Level 1 Writing</p> | <p><b>Born:</b> in U.S.</p> <p><b>Home language:</b><br/>Mexican Spanish</p> <p><b>Home language skills:</b><br/>informal speaking and listening, does not read or write in Spanish</p> <p><b>Enrolled in U.S. schools:</b><br/>in Kindergarten</p> <p><b>Educational background:</b><br/>5.5 years in U.S. school</p> <p><b>Background in English:</b><br/>lifelong exposure within and outside school</p> <p><b>ACCESS for ELLs test scores:</b><br/>Level 5 Listening<br/>Level 4 Speaking<br/>Level 3 Reading<br/>Level 2 Writing</p> | <p><b>Born:</b> in India</p> <p><b>Home language:</b><br/>Gujarati</p> <p><b>Home language skills:</b><br/>unknown</p> <p><b>Enrolled in U.S. schools:</b><br/>in the middle of last year (4th grade)</p> <p><b>Educational background:</b><br/>3.5 years of consistent schooling in India, 1 year in U.S. school</p> <p><b>Background in English:</b><br/>3.5 years of British English instruction with little practice in oral language</p> <p><b>ACCESS for ELLs test scores:</b><br/>Level 2 Listening<br/>Level 1 Speaking<br/>Level 4 Reading<br/>Level 5 Writing</p> |

## Planning the Lesson

Now that we know more about the students in Mr. Nelson's class, we can walk through the planning process and consider how the content and language objectives of a particular lesson will be introduced to them.

### SPECIFYING CONTENT OBJECTIVES

Mr. Nelson's rainforest lesson includes a culminating writing assignment that requires students to write a three-paragraph essay describing features of the rainforest before and after deforestation. This assignment will address two of the **big ideas or enduring understandings** that Mr. Nelson has written for the whole unit: 1) *Rainforests worldwide are threatened by deforestation* and 2) *Citizens can take action to challenge deforestation*.

Content objectives are written for each lesson, and reflect the big ideas that all students must learn in order to succeed in a particular instructional unit. They should be the same for all students, including ELLs. Mr. Nelson writes the following content objectives on the board for all students:

**TERMINOLOGY**  
NOTE: some educators may use "learning targets" or other terms to refer to content-related "big ideas/enduring understandings" at the unit level. These goals are broader in nature than the objectives of a particular lesson.

## CONTENT OBJECTIVES: Students will be able to...

- Describe features of the rainforest before deforestation
- Describe features of the rainforest after deforestation
- Compare and contrast features of the rainforest before and after deforestation
- Prepare a persuasive argument for or against deforestation to present orally to the town council

Mr. Nelson holds high expectations for his students, and he includes critical thinking objectives into all of his lessons. Students need to use higher-order thinking to *compare*, *contrast*, and *persuade* than they do to describe. English language learners at all levels of language proficiency can and should be engaged in higher-order thinking tasks, but they may need support to express their ideas through language.

## SELECTING THE LANGUAGE OBJECTIVES

Although Mr. Nelson is not an ESL teacher, he assumes responsibility not only for content objectives but also for language objectives for all of the students in his class. Mr. Nelson is committed to sharing responsibility for learning and achievement of the ELLs in his class with Ms. Krukowski, the ESL teacher who works with Marco, Amitabh, and Julia, and he knows that non-ELLs can also benefit tremendously from his careful attention to academic language across the content areas. Thus, he routinely develops language objectives to accompany his content objectives for each lesson.

Language objectives need to be differentiated according to students' ELP levels and other important background factors. Mr. Nelson writes the following language objectives on the board for all of his students.

## LANGUAGE OBJECTIVES: Students will be able to...

- Understand and use key vocabulary orally and in writing, such as:
  - *rainforest, deforestation, erosion/erode, habitat, destruction/destroy, ecosystem*
- Use oral and written language to *describe*, *compare*, *contrast*, and *persuade*, which might involve practicing with:
  - *organizational features of oral and written arguments*
  - *conjunctions (and, but, or, yet, so, if, even though, unless, etc.)*

Notice that Mr. Nelson's language objectives focus on 1) key content vocabulary, complexity, and grammar; 2) reading, writing, listening, and speaking for academic purposes; and 3) the specific academic language functions *describe*, *compare*, *contrast*, and *persuade*.



## USING THE DIFFERENTIATED ASSIGNMENT TEMPLATE TO SUPPORT ELLS

Equipped with information about what his ELLs can do in English and in their home languages, as well as a clear understanding of the content and language objectives for all students, Mr. Nelson is prepared to identify the types of scaffolds and supports that his ELLs will need to engage with and learn from the activities he prepares for his class. The differentiated assignment/assessment template focuses his work.

Mr. Nelson begins filling out the template with the content-based expectations for all students (row 2) as these are the same for all students. Then, Mr. Nelson will fill out the language-based expectations for each student (row 1). Each student will have different language expectations based on their language proficiency levels. Mr. Nelson will create expectations that correspond with each student's current ELP level. For guidance in drafting these expectations, Mr. Nelson can look at the WIDA CAN DO Descriptors. Finally, Mr. Nelson will fill out the part of the template that details supports for each student (row 3) and support he will use with all students (right hand column). See his completed template on p. 5.

Aha! Do you notice how the language objectives address the three criteria of WIDA's Performance Definitions: vocabulary usage, linguistic complexity, and language forms and conventions?



| LEVEL 1 (MARCO)   | LEVEL 2 (JULIA)  | LEVEL 5 (AMITABH)   | ALL STUDENTS   |
|---|--|---|--|
| <b>LANGUAGE-BASED EXPECTATIONS:</b><br>WRITING<br>Produce descriptive words or phrases  | <b>LANGUAGE-BASED EXPECTATIONS:</b><br>WRITING<br>Write simple sentences using descriptive language and occasional academic content-related vocabulary   | <b>LANGUAGE BASED EXPECTATIONS:</b><br>WRITING<br>Write a three-paragraph comparative essay using descriptive language, a variety of academic content related vocabulary, and complex sentence structures   | <b>LANGUAGE-BASED EXPECTATIONS:</b><br>WRITING<br>Write a three-paragraph comparative essay using descriptive language, a variety of academic content related vocabulary, and complex sentence structures  |
| <b>STANDARDS-BASED CONTENT OR TOPIC (FROM THE CURRICULUM):</b><br>Features of the rainforest before and after deforestation   |  |   |  |
| <b>SUPPORTS:</b><br>Using <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• experiences gained in a field trip to a botanical center</li> <li>• a graphic organizer (T-chart) to show content understanding</li> <li>• word and picture cards featuring pretaught vocabulary (to be used when labeling the graphic organizer to show content understanding)</li> <li>• pictorially supported rainforest texts</li> <li>• a chant to assist students in remembering key phrases and vocabulary</li> <li>• realia related to rainforest products (e.g., fruit, medicinal plants, wood carvings)</li> <li>• a think-aloud demonstration of labeling</li> <li>• photographs of forestation and deforestation to guide writing</li> </ul> | <b>SUPPORTS:</b><br>Using <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• experiences gained in a field trip to a botanical center</li> <li>• a graphic organizer (Venn diagram) to guide writing and show content understanding</li> <li>• pictorially supported rainforest texts</li> <li>• pretaught vocabulary</li> <li>• a chant to assist students in remembering key phrases and vocabulary</li> <li>• realia related to rainforest products (e.g., fruit, medicinal plants, wood carvings)</li> <li>• a think-aloud demonstration of sentence writing</li> <li>• photographs of forestation and deforestation to guide writing</li> </ul> | <b>SUPPORTS:</b><br>Using <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• experiences gained in a field trip to a botanical center</li> <li>• a graphic organizer (Venn diagram) to guide writing</li> <li>• grade-level rainforest texts</li> <li>• a chant with written lyrics to assist students in remembering key phrases and vocabulary</li> <li>• a bilingual dictionary</li> </ul> | <b>SUPPORTS:</b><br>Using <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• experiences gained in a field trip to a botanical center</li> <li>• a graphic organizer (Venn diagram) guide writing</li> <li>• grade-level rainforest texts</li> <li>• a chant to assist students in remembering key phrases and vocabulary</li> </ul> |

Differentiated assignment/assessment template for a fifth grade writing assignment. Source: Fairbairn & Jones-Vo, 2010, adapted and reprinted with permission from Caslon Publishing.



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All teachers (classroom/content-area, special education, literacy, ESL, bilingual) must consider several factors when differentiating instruction for the English language learners in their classrooms. We saw that Mr. Nelson first needed to get to know his students, understand what skills and assets his ELLs bring to the classroom, and identify their ELP levels. This information then enabled him to identify appropriate language based-expectations and supports for each of his ELLs. As a result of Mr. Nelson's differentiated writing activity, his students will be able to successfully demonstrate their understanding of the standards-based content objectives.

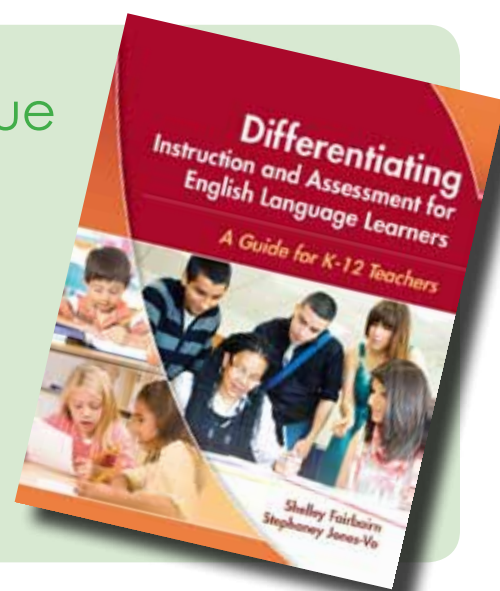
Part II of WIDA's Focus on Differentiation will continue the discussion of Mr. Nelson, his students, and the lesson on rainforests to explore how teachers can implement instructional scaffolding and support strategies such as those listed in the template on p. 5 for their students. It will also explore differentiated classroom assessment of ELLs.

## Featured in this Issue

Differentiating Instruction  
and Assessment for English  
Language Learners:  
A Guide for K-12 Teachers

*by Shelley Fairbairn and  
Stephaney Jones-Vo*

Available at [www.caslonpublishing.com](http://www.caslonpublishing.com)



## Feedback and Sharing

Do you have ideas for what you'd like to see in a future WIDA Focus Bulletin? Do you have personal experiences you can share about the instruction and assessment of language learners? We hope to include many of your stories and suggestions in future issues of this bulletin. Please send an email to [help@wida.us](mailto:help@wida.us) and write "Focus Bulletin idea" in the subject line.

## WIDA's Mission

WIDA supports academic language development and academic achievement for linguistically diverse students through high quality standards, assessments, research, and professional development for educators.